

Sermon for July 25, 2021 by Rev. Andi Fox—Psalm 14 & Proverbs 1:20-33

Both Psalms and Proverbs are part of the Bible's wisdom literature section, and these passages deal with foolishness and wisdom directly. The Psalm says that people doing evil are everywhere. No one is good--not even one person. Except that God is present in some people because God is their refuge. It is God who will change the people's circumstances for the better. Proverbs gives us a character many call Lady Wisdom yelling at people on the streets to pay attention to them. They are willing to teach if only you would learn. When disaster comes, the fools will look for Lady Wisdom and will not find them. The smugness of the fools is their downfall while the righteous will dwell secure.

Wisdom literature always makes me a little uneasy. It casts things into strict categories and tells us which category to stick with for the best result. The wisdom we learn from Proverbs seems straightforward and universally applicable. Lady Wisdom claims if you follow their way you won't be troubled by the dread of harm. They seem to say: Follow the right path. Work hard. You'll be rewarded. But let's be honest. Things aren't that simple, and Lady Wisdom knows that. Things happen that are out of our control. There are systems in place in our society that keep poor people poor and make the rich richer no matter how hard the poor people work. Sometimes the system promises you one thing like 'go to college and you'll be rewarded' and gives you another like 'you will never be able to pay off

your student debt'. Sometimes you just have bad luck like a friend of mine who spent years after graduating from seminary delivering pizzas because they couldn't find a job in ministry to support them with full time employment. It is a privilege to be able to read Lady Wisdom so straightforwardly. But are we giving Lady Wisdom enough credit if we do?

Many who read the passages about Lady Wisdom call her a personification of God, but Lady Wisdom sounds to me not like God but like a prophet. Prophets are meant to point out shortcomings and tell the people to turn back to God. It is not their job to be understanding or compassionate. A prophet warns people that there will be consequences for their actions, and that God is one who is merciful. A prophet may laugh when a foolish person meets disaster because they have been shouting warnings and they may feel vindicated when bad things happen to those who wouldn't listen to them. But I don't think that's how God reacts. I think God sighs the weary sigh of a caretaker who wonders how many times we have to make the same mistake before we actually learn something.

What Lady Wisdom is getting to in this passage is stated better in Proverbs 9:10: "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; the knowledge of the holy one is understanding." Those who choose not to know God are the ones who reject Lady Wisdom because all wisdom is knowing God. So maybe things aren't so

straightforward as they appear on the surface because God certainly understands the complexities of our world. The wise ones follow God.

Then who are the foolish ones talked about in Psalm 14? The first verse says “fools say in their hearts there is no God.” We read that sentence from the 21st century where arguments about whether or not there is a divine have been happening for a long time. Back when Psalms was written, though, that wasn’t the question. Theology didn’t start out with the question is there something or someone divine or not. Theology started out with the question what kind of divine exists? The fool saying there is no God doesn’t mean this fool is an atheist but rather this fool believes that God is not present and working in the world. The Psalm says, fools and evildoers are corrupt. Fools and evildoers will panic because God is with the righteous or, as we might say in light of Proverbs, God is with the wise. God is working through the wise and is present with them in our world.

This casting of folks into wise and foolish may make us feel good. After all, we’re the wise ones, right? I don’t think wisdom is a destination. Wisdom is a journey, and plenty of wise people have done unwise things and unwise people sometimes do wise things. It’s a hard line to walk, though. We’re always learning. Our culture is full of stories of people doing what they think is right that may or may not actually be right. One of my favorite examples of this is the movie Captain Marvel. Spoiler alert. If you haven’t watched Captain Marvel yet you

might want to mute me for a couple of minutes. When the movie starts, the main character is called Vers by the people around her. She's a member of Starforce and part of the Kree Empire. Vers has vowed vengeance over the alien shapeshifter Skrulls because she believes they killed her family and took her memory. Over the course of the movie Vers discovers she's Carol Danvers from Earth and the Skrulls are the ones who are being persecuted by Starforce. Carol realizes she's been on the wrong side. The Skrull general Talos is generously understanding. He says: "Carol, this is war. My hands are filthy from it too. But we're here now. You found my family. This is just the beginning. There's thousands of us separated from each other, scattered throughout the galaxy." Having gained a better understanding of the situation, Carol works with the Skrulls to keep them from getting captured by Starforce.

Carol had incredibly strong convictions that turned out to be wrong, but Talos doesn't shame Carol. He understands she was working without full knowledge of what was going on. Once that knowledge is gained, there is no question which side Carol is on. She's on the side of the oppressed. We may not have powers gained from blowing up an Infinity Stone-powered engine, but we all have the ability to use the wisdom we've gained for the betterment of all.

This past Wednesday the prayer group was sharing wisdom from our families, and I shared my family's guiding principle: "Pray for the best--Prepare

for the worst.” I was wondering. Does that make us pragmatic? Wise? Foolish? Or some combination? If we’re constantly thinking about the worst scenario, are we functioning as the fools in Psalm 14 do, like God isn’t present in our world? Or are we wise because the worst has happened in other times, and at least we’re prepared? This thinking also gives other family members the impulse to always give advice even if it’s not wanted. Sometimes especially when it’s not wanted.

My sister said this week something that made a lot more sense to me: “wisdom is not judging others for the decisions they make.” Honestly, I think that’s a much better family motto. That is a piece of wisdom I would rather give to the next generations. We’re all just doing our best in the world, and we don’t always understand each other’s circumstances. It’s one thing for a prophet like Lady Wisdom to cry out for people to listen to them, and it’s another to judge one another. Haven’t we all done things that we thought were smart that ended up being not so smart or maybe did something in a tense moment that ended up biting us later? Wisdom doesn’t mean you never do anything foolish. Wisdom means you learn from those foolish things. Wisdom knows only God can judge us. Wisdom knows we make mistakes because wisdom is the awe and knowledge of God. If there’s anyone out there who understands what we do, it’s God.

Shirley Guthrie, a long time professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, wrote this in his most well-known book *Christine Doctrine*: “God

makes the first move, loving before people ask for love or even acknowledge their need for it. Long before we seek and turn to God, God seeks us out and turns to us.” Lady Wisdom calls for us to seek wisdom in the knowledge of God. The Psalms warn us away from acting like God isn’t paying attention or isn’t active in our world. But let us never forget that it is God who ultimately decides what is wise and what is foolish. Amen.